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FM AMEMBASSY BANGKOK

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 4115

INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 002555

SIPDIS

NSC FOR PHU, DRL FOR BUCKLEY

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/27/2018

TAGS: PGOV PHUM PINR TH

SUBJECT: THAI PROTEST UPDATE: POLICE AND PAD PEACEFULLY COEXIST AT GOVERNMENT HOUSE WHILE PAD LEADERS FACE ARREST

REF: A. BANGKOK 2546 (PAD PROTESTS CHALLENGE PM SAMAK)
1B. BANGKOK 2405 (TENSIONS ESCALATE AT THAI PROTESTS)

Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary and Comment:

11. (SBU) One day after demonstrations and the seizure of government buildings by the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) shook the Thai political scene (Ref A), Prime Minister Samak and the Thai police reached an uneasy temporary accommodation August 27 with the anti-government demonstrators seeking Samak's removal. A large crowd of PAD demonstrators continued to occupy the Government House compound, and police overnight reinforced their contingent on the compound with riot police in full gear, but the two sides remained separated physically. PM Samak continued to operate out of the Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters on the outskirts of the city. Police leaders said they were waiting a court decision on arrest warrants prior to taking action against the PAD leaders and their supporters. Domestic reaction in the Thai media was uniformly critical of the PAD assault on a government-run TV station August 26; in contrast, it praised the restraint shown by PM Samak and security forces in not overreacting, though the media rejected Samak's call for Thai to "take sides."

12. (C) Comment: While there is little doubt that PAD had hoped to provoke conflict, the Thai government and police have so far pursued a passive posture with the apparent intent to avoid confrontation. Army Commander Anupong made clear to the Ambassador August 27 that the military was staying out of politics and the current showdown. Late on August 27, the police pushed back their deadline request for the PAD to leave the compound to Saturday August 30, citing a royally-sponsored ceremony planned to be held on the grounds that day; since the PAD vowed a minimum three day occupation of the compound, there remains time and room for compromise. The attempted execution of arrest warrants could prove to be a decisive point in this round of anti-government protests, however, as it remains unclear how PAD supporters would react if the police tried to arrest their leaders; firebrand Sondhi Limthongkul claimed he could not be arrested without the use of force. Ambassador will see PM Samak August 28. End summary and comment.

STANDOFF AT GOVERNMENT HOUSE CONTINUES

13. (SBU) The Royal Thai Police (RTP) and the Peoples Alliance for Democracy (PAD) reached a temporary accommodation August 27 in their standoff after mass demonstrations the previous day (reftel A). The police sent reinforcements into the grounds of the Government House, the formal seat of government, at 3 a.m.; estimates as of the afternoon of August 27 put police numbers at 2,000 to 2,500 and PAD demonstrators at 16,000 to 18,000. The PAD and police had negotiated terms to share the compound, with the two sides physically separated by structures on the grounds; most of the riot police were not in sight at mid-day, with only 20-30 regular police standing near the office building normally used by the PM. Police spokesman MGEN Suraphol reconfirmed to us that the police would not use force to clear the compound.

ARREST WARRANTS TO BE EXECUTED?

14. (SBU) There are indications, however, that the police will act sometime in the near future. Suraphol told us police commanders were waiting for a court to issue arrest warrants for PAD leaders, based on the events of August 26, before pursuing possible actions against the PAD. Possible charges against the leaders include inciting a crowd, illegally entering government buildings, and others.

15. (SBU) The leaders of the movement may thus soon face a choice of forcefully resisting arrest or to be seen as giving

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up to the police and Samak government. Major General (ret.) Chamlong Srimuang and Sondhi Limthongkul, the primary public leaders of the PAD, indicated they would choose widely divergent actions if faced with police arrest. Chamlong publicly said he would not resist arrest, while Sondhi continued to dare the police to try to arrest him. In the meantime, PAD leaders have publicly designated a team of nine activists to replace the nine leaders who potentially face arrest.

HAS PAD OVERPLAYED ITS HAND?

16. (SBU) Local media coverage turned decidedly against the PAD August 27. The seizure of NBT (reftel A) by PAD supporters was almost universally described as an affront to press freedom and a movement away from the professed PAD goal of salvaging Thai democracy. Editorials in the August 27 editions of prominent Thai- and English-language newspapers criticized the PAD for its actions and called on all sides to use restraint. Thai Rath, the most widely-read Thai-language newspaper, voiced concerns that the PAD would lose its ability to control its supporters and that the government might be forced to resort to force to control the situation. Other newspapers praised police and military restraint, while criticizing Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej for potentially adding fuel to an already enflamed situation by making offensive remarks about PAD supporters and for his call for the Thai people to take sides in the conflict.

MILITARY GIVES SAMAK AN OFFICE, SAYS NO COUP

17. (SBU) According to press reports, Prime Minister Samak continued to operate out of the Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters, which is approximately twenty-five kilometers from central Bangkok. The Thai military remained quiet, with Air Force Commander-in-Chief Air Chief Marshall Chalit Pukbhasuk, a member of the now defunct Council for National Security which included the leaders of the September 2006 coup, insisting that the military would not conduct a coup to relieve the current political tension.

JOHN